

Air Chief Marshal Bhadauria interview: 'We will expand operational utility of Tejas'

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is observing the first anniversary of Balakot air strikes that were targeted at terror camps in Pakistan on February 26, 2019.

To mark the significance of one of the most complex operations in modern warfare executed with military precision and punch, Air Chief Marshal R K S Bhadauria flew a five aircraft mission from Srinagar Air Base on Wednesday.

Flying alongside the Chief of Air Staff's MiG-21 Type 69 was two Mirage-2000s and two Sukhoi-30 MKIs – the aircrew from squadrons that had participated in the operations on February 26, 27 last year.

At the helm of IAF affairs since October 2019, Air Chief Marshal Bhadauria is widely seen as a man backing home-grown efforts in aerospace and defence sector.

In the last five months, as the Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Bhadauria has initiated several steps to enhance the combat capabilities of the IAF.

Areas such as sensor/weapons technology, network/data management, artificial intelligence, operational/maintenance practices and training/supporting of human resources have got a fresh impetus so as to prepare the air warriors for the challenges of the 21st century.

In an interview to Onmanorama, Air Chief Marshal Bhadauria says that these are interesting times for the IAF.

“The very nature of warfare is changing rapidly,” he says

Excerpts from the interview:

Squadron strength

The reducing strength of IAF combat assets is no secret. We have not been sitting idle in the interim, however. We have mitigated the numbers by improving serviceability and enhancing weapons suite.

We are ensuring timely upgrades of legacy platforms and working on new inductions to increase the numbers. The planned induction of the LCA versions and the acquisition of MRFA (Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft) will halt this trend and result in an increase in the desired numbers in a short to medium timeframe.

The induction of LCA MKII will enhance the squadron numbers. The development of indigenous fifth generation aircraft technologies for AMCA (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft) is part of our long term plans.

It is important that the development and deliveries are as per the planned induction schedules if we are to build the numbers and capability in reasonable time frame.

IAF in 10 years

These are interesting times for the IAF. The very nature of warfare is changing rapidly, and we now have to be simultaneously effective across multiple domains and levels of warfare extending from conventional to countering sub conventional threats.

We have to not only embrace emerging fifth generation technologies/ capabilities but master the emergent technologies in cyber, networking and big data to be always ahead of our adversaries in capability and thought process.

The IAF in 10 years hence will be different. Today, we are laying a robust foundation for the IAF to be a relevant and effective force for the threat perception of the future.

We have a clear roadmap. The planning process is already underway for combat systems like optimally manned sixth generation technologies, smart wingman concept, swarm drones, long persistent HALE (High Altitude Long Endurance) platforms, hypersonic weapons among others.

On 83 Tejas MKIA deal

There were no plans to sign the deal during DefExpo 2020. This appears to have featured only in the media in the run up to the show. The process is underway and I see no major impediments. We should see the contract being closed within this financial year.

On LCA MKII & AMCA

My directions to the IAF programme management teams (PMT) at Aeronautical Development Agency are clear and they are to involve completely in the design and development process of the projects LCA MKII & AMCA.

The IAF has been completely involved in the Tejas Mk1 and the Mk1A both in terms of placing orders and providing domain expertise. As customers we are fully committed to the success of the indigenous fighter programmes.

2nd Tejas Sqn at Sulur

The first squadron (No 45 Sqn, Flying Daggers) is continuing to evolve the operational philosophy and validate the combat roles of the Tejas in IAF service. With the induction of the second squadron, we will enhance the operational utilisation of the Tejas.

The Tejas has very good capabilities and as we gain experience we will continue to expand its operational utility in IAF plans.

On desi missions

The IAF has firmly backed the indigenous efforts of our industry and we have reposed faith in them. Now it is time for the public sector to step up and deliver. The rate of production definitely needs to be enhanced and measures will have to be taken to ensure quality is maintained and effective maintenance support is provided to support our forces in the field.

Private sector

The private sector also needs to move beyond discussions and expressions of interest, and firmly invest in providing the necessary platforms and systems to enable us to completely switch to indigenous equipment.

Here, I would like to mention that we also need to think beyond just import substitution but also incubate high technologies and innovations, and indeed become world leaders in this aspect.

On Gaganyaan

The IAF has been closely working with ISRO since the MoU signing in May 2019 on crew selection and training for Mission Gaganyaan. We have selected the pilots for the mission after a comprehensive and rigorous process. They have commenced their training at Russia with our Russian partners.

The IAF has been involved in the training process both on the operational and aero-medical fronts and we are working in close coordination with ISRO. The IAF specialist wings at Bengaluru -- the Aircraft Systems and Training Establishment (ASTE) and the Institute of Aerospace Medicine (IAM) - continue to work closely with ISRO on relevant design and testing aspects.

The Rafale edge

The Rafale will be a game changer in many ways. With its India-specific enhancements in avionics, electronic warfare and weapons suite, radar, HMD (helmet-mounted display) and the ability to operate from high altitude airfields, the Rafale will be one of the most contemporary and potent platforms in the region.

It will give us the first shot advantage in the aerial battle and provide us greater reach and punch, enhancing our ability to strike hard and deep and control the air battle in the subcontinent.

We are working proactively to integrate it fully with our existing assets in order to operationalise this capability quickly when the aircraft arrives.

Takeaways from DefExpo

The number of Indian exhibitors both from the public and private sector at Def Expo2020 has shown that the focus is shifting steadily towards indigenization and Make in India in the defence sector.

I have had many fruitful interactive sessions with delegations from overseas. Apart from showcasing the indigenous defence industry projects, we have identified many avenues of cooperation, especially in training, joint exercises and HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) operations.

<https://www.defencenews.in/article/Air-Chief-Marshal-Bhadauria-interview-We-will-expand-operational-utility-of-Tejas-809461>